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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000462

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PARM](#) [CE](#) [JA](#) [NO](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Sixth round of GSL-LTTE talks reportedly gets off to better-than-expected start

Refs: (A) Colombo-SA/INS 03-17-03 telecon  
- (B) Colombo 450, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills.

Reasons: 1.5 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Tigers used the first day of the sixth round of talks in Japan to condemn the March 10 sinking of one of their resupply ships by the Sri Lankan navy. Milinda Moragoda, a key GSL minister and negotiator, called the Ambassador from Japan and said atmospherics for the first day were largely positive. Moragoda conveyed a Tiger request to participate in the April 14 donor meeting in Washington. There was another incident off the northeast coast on March 17, but it has been resolved. The talks seem to have gotten off to a better-than-expected start. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Mission understands that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) used the first day of the sixth round of talks in Japan to complain about the March 10 sinking of one of its resupply ships by the Sri Lankan navy. (Note: The talks are taking place in Hakone, a resort town outside of Tokyo, from March 18-21. See Ref B, for further details re the March 10 incident.) In March 18 and 19 telephone conversations, Milinda Moragoda, the GSL Minister of Economic Reform and a key GSL negotiator, told the Ambassador that the talks had been largely cordial in spite of the Tigers' complaints re the March 10 incident. Moragoda noted that the GSL had acceded to a LTTE request that Sea Tiger Leader Soosai meet with Sri Lanka Navy Commander D. Sandagiri. After some discussion, it was agreed that the meeting would take place within the next three weeks. Moragoda's overall impression was that the talks were proceeding well and that the LTTE did not want to disrupt the peace process over the March 10 incident, but simply register its concern.

13. (C) Moragoda noted to the Ambassador that on March 19 he had been approached by chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham and asked whether the LTTE could be represented at the April 14 donor's meeting in Washington. Balasingham stressed that the Tigers have shown their commitment to peace and should thus be permitted to be represented at the conference. The Ambassador responded that Balasingham's comments had been noted, but the answer is a firm "no." (Note: Re this issue, Mission is faxing SA/INS a letter from Jeevan Thiagarajah, the head of the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, a local NGO, advocating that the LTTE-controlled Tamil Rehabilitation Organization be allowed to attend the April 14 conference.)

14. (C) Moragoda also told the Ambassador that the delegations in Hakone were currently discussing possible means of implementing development assistance. Along those lines, the LTTE expressed concern that the U.S. planned to oppose the North/East Rehabilitation Fund (NERF) as a means of coordinating aid going into LTTE-controlled areas. The Ambassador noted to Moragoda that although the USG would not work through the NERF, it would not oppose NERF's use by other donors. The Ambassador added that the USG would find a way to keep the NERF informed of its bilateral assistance efforts.

15. (C) (((Note: On a separate issue, Moragoda related to the Ambassador that Balasingham had mentioned to him recent press reports that the U.S. planned to provide the GSL an old U.S. Coast Guard cutter. Balasingham did not complain about the reported procurement, but seemed to want Moragoda to know that the LTTE had noticed the reports. Based on Balasingham's reaction, Moragoda told the Ambassador that the LTTE was signaling "message received." End Note.)))

16. (C) Local observers were encouraged that the talks seem to be going relatively well despite the recent tensions sparked by the March 10 incident. Kethesh Loganathan of the Center for Policy Alternatives, a well-regarded local think tank, commented that he was

pleasantly surprised that the Tigers seemed to want the talks to be constructive in nature. Like other observers, he said he had feared the group would use the talks simply to hit out at the GSL over the March 10 incident and on other issues. He also characterized as "amazingly positive" Balasingham's reported comments to the press that the LTTE would "never walk out of the peace process."

17. (C) In the meantime, as reported in Ref A, there was another incident off the northeast coast on March 17, but it has been resolved. According to GSL reports, navy ships spotted a LTTE craft off the coast of Trincomalee on March 17 and asked the boat to stop, but it would not. After firing warning shots, the boat did stop and the three LTTE cadre on board surrendered. The navy took the men on shore, but later released them. Apparently, despite the navy's initial fears, no arms-related equipment was found on the boat, although the navy wonders whether the LTTE cadre dumped cargo during the chase. The Norwegian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission is looking into what transpired, but has told us that the incident does not seem to have led to any increase in tension between the two sides.

18. (C) COMMENT: Because of the March 10 incident, there had been widespread concerns that the Hakone talks would be contentious. Based on what we are hearing, however, the talks seem to have gotten off to a better-than-expected start. Moreover, Balasingham seems to be trying his level best to give off good vibrations in his interactions with the press. In our estimation, while it is still early, the Tigers appear to want to make this round of talks work out in a positive fashion. If the Tigers continue to behave, that would help the government, which has been under sharp pressure from anti-peace process elements of late. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS